

NAI NEWSLETTER

20 June 2007

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN SIERRA LEONE

TEST FOR DEMOCRACY IN SIERRA LEONE

By Mats Utas

On August 11 Sierra Leone will vote democratically for the second time since the end of the decade long civil war that raged between 1991 and 2002. Many international observers believe that this election is an important test for democracy in Sierra Leone. Many Sierra Leoneans call democracy *Dem-are-Crazy* and politics *politrix*.

The 2007 contestants

In August there are basically three political parties that people will vote for. The two political dragons: All People's Congress (APC) and Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), and the newcomer People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC). During its two periods in power, SLPP has secured a lot of funds for campaigning, yet improved little on the ground and thus not gained any popularity – instead there is a growing nostalgia for the APC years (1968–92) in power. Politically, APC also appears much stronger in this election. A long-standing schism within the party leadership appears to be temporarily bridged. It is clear that APC will take most of the northern part of the country (their traditional power base) and Freetown. SLPP remains strong in the south, although PMDC, a SLPP splinter party, to an equal degree has the south as its stronghold and will win at least some constituencies there. The diamond-rich east will be a key district where the outcome remains uncertain.

One party must win 55% of the votes on August 11, or else there will be a second round of votes. In the case of a second round, it is highly feasible that most PMDC voters will back SLPP. This is based on the assumption of free and fair elections. The security situation remains stable although some trouble within the army remains. Certainly some of the earlier militias will be on stand-by. One concern raised by observers, especially those in opposition to the ruling party, is that the elections will take place at the height of the rainy

season. This could reduce participation and limit the presence of election observers, especially in the rural parts of the country where roads are in poor condition and transport is minimal during the rains, making some areas almost inaccessible.

The democratic process has remained at a low level in Sierra Leone in spite of general elections having already been held in 1962. Patron-client politics is still of utmost importance throughout the country even though some changes can be observed in the bigger cities. Currently in Freetown, hordes of people line up outside the party headquarters and more so at the party leaders' mansions in order to receive their mandatory money in exchange for promising their votes. This has been going on at least since April, when I last visited the country. Popular musicians sing against this kind of campaigning and people state that they are fed up with the ways of the *politrix* and manipulated democracy, but in the end they succumb to the political game, knowing just how fragile their lives are and how important patrons can be for their future. Money counts, or as a popular saying goes *Money in the hand – back to the ground*. Striking poverty and social insecurity are the main reasons for this kind of popular *real politics*.

Brief political background

Sierra Leone became independent in 1961. Its post-colonial political history shows a dominance of two political parties: Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) which ruled between 1961 and 1967, and 1996 until the present, and All People's Congress (APC) which ruled between 1968 and 1992, with the interception of three military governments (1967–1968, 1992–1996, 1997–1998). Siaka Stevens, APC leader and president between 1968 and 1985, turned Sierra Leone into a one-party state and reigned in typical cold-war style with internationally "accepted" institutionalized forms of state/civilian violence and mismanagement of government funds. APC's abuse of power eventually paved the way for both the rurally based Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel force and two "urban" military governments during the 1990s. The widespread blaming of APC for leading Sierra Leone into decline and civil war was an important reason for SLPP's return to state power in the 1996 elections.

Party names and their leaders:

APC: All People's Congress, Ernest Bai Koroma

SLPP: Sierra Leone People's Party, Solomon Berewa

PMDC: People's Movement for Democratic Change, Charles Margai

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Mats Utas is a researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute with a research project: Youth and Marginality in Urban Sierra Leone.

http://www.nai.uu.se/research/areas/youth_and_marginality/

Utass is currently researching youth activities during the election campaign in a project called "Elections 2007. Youth, Politics and Technical Mobilisation".

Mats Utass will be in Sierra Leone (6–16 August) during the elections.

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USEFUL WEBSITES:

Sierra Leone National Electoral Commission (NEC):
<http://www.necsierraleone.org/>

Government of Sierra Leone:
<http://www.statehouse.sl/>

UNDP Sierra Leone:
<http://www.sl.undp.org/>

International Federation of Electoral Systems (IFES)
<http://www.electionguide.org/country.php?ID=192>

DFID on Sierra Leone :

<http://www.dfid.gov.uk/countries/africa/sierraleone.asp>

Sierra Leone in the world press:

<http://www.worldpress.org/Africa/2173.cfm>

<http://www.irinnews.org/Africa-Country.aspx?Country=SL>

Sierra Leone newspapers online:

http://standardtimespress.net/cgi-bin/artman/publish/cat_index_44.shtml

<http://awaresstimes.com/drwebsite/publish/index.shtml>

NEW BOOKS FROM THE NORDIC AFRICA INSTITUTE

Reconciling Winners and Losers in Post-Conflict Elections in West Africa. Political and Policy Imperatives. Editors: Carin Norberg and Cyril Obi. Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute, 2007. ISBN 978-91-7106-568-1. Free for download.

<http://www.nai.uu.se/publications/books/book.xml?id=25242>><http://www.nai.uu.se/publications/books/book.xml?id=25242>

In post-conflict societies, elections play several roles. They provide citizens with the opportunity to freely choose their leaders and representatives, and provide countries emerging from civil wars with new opportunities to come to terms with a traumatic past and rebuild their lives and societies in a secure and stable environment. For the international community, post-conflict elections lend credibility to peace agreements and provide an exit strategy. However, when elections are poorly timed or administered, and outstanding issues of justice, participation, national ownership and sustainability of the peace process are not well addressed, there is always a chance that the entire process may unravel. This report based on the debates and discussions of a panel debate on Winners and Losers in Post-Conflict Elections in West Africa, draws on insights from post-conflict elections in the sub-region and provides some crucial policy recommendations as well as areas for further research.

COMMENTS ON THE NEWSLETTER ARE WELCOME

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